The Simile of the Cobra and the Raft

A Discourse on Grasping Wisdom Without Being Bitten

From the Alagaddūpamasutta (MN 22), *The Middle Discourses* of the Buddha

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A Harmful Misconception Arises

The discourse begins with a mendicant named Ariṭṭha, a former vulture trapper, who develops a dangerous interpretation of the Buddha's teaching.

> "As I understand the Buddha's teaching, the acts that he says are obstructions are not really obstructions for the one who performs them."

Ariṭṭha's view suggests that actions described as spiritually obstructive (like indulging in sensual pleasures) have no negative consequences. This fundamental misunderstanding prompts the entire discourse.

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A Doctrine Grasped by the Tail

1. Peer Correction: Other mendicants attempt to dissuade Ariṭṭha, reminding him of the Buddha's many teachings on the dangers dangers of sensual pleasures (similes of a skeleton, a pit of glowing coals, a snake's head). Ariṭṭha obstinately refuses.

2. The Buddha's Summons: Unable to persuade him, the mendicants report to the Buddha, who summons Ariṭṭha.

3. The Rebuke: The Buddha directly confronts him, asking, "Futile man, who on earth have you ever known me to teach in that way?"

4. The Result: Faced with the Buddha, Ariṭṭha 'sat silent, dismayed, shoulders drooping, downcast, depressed, with nothing to say.'

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The Simile of the Cobra: The Peril of a Wrong Grasp

The Scenario: The Buddha explains that some people memorize the teachings "for the sake of finding fault and winning debates," without wisely examining their true meaning.

> "Suppose there was a person in need of a cobra... and grasp it by the coil or the tail. But that cobra would twist back and bite them on the hand or the arm... resulting in death or deadly pain."
>
> *Why is that? Because of their wrong grasp of the cobra.*

The Conclusion: In the same way, wrongly grasped teachings lead to lasting harm and suffering.

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The Simile of the Cobra: Handling Wisdom with Care

The Scenario: In contrast, a 'gentleman' memorizes the teachings and 'examines their meaning with wisdom,' coming to a genuine acceptance. They seek the goal, not victory in debate.

> "They'd see a big cobra, and hold it down carefully with a cleft stick. Only then would they correctly grasp it by the neck... that wouldn't result in death or deadly pain."

Why is that? Because of their correct grasp of the cobra.

Correctly grasped teachings lead to lasting welfare and happiness.

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From Peril to Purpose: The Raft

Having explained how to handle the teachings safely, the Buddha now reveals their true function. They are not an end in themselves, but a practical tool designed for a specific task.

Avenir Next Regular

"Mendicants, I will teach you a simile of the teaching as a raft: for crossing vr̄, not for holding on. Listen and apply your mind well, I will speak."

Avenir Next Regular

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A Journey Across the Deluge

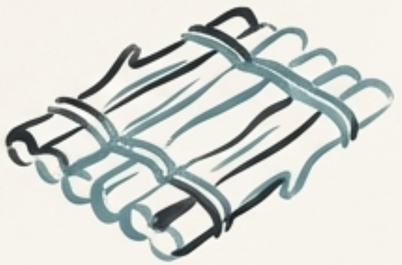
THE NEAR SHORE:
Dubious and Perilous

THE OBSTACLE:
A large deluge

THE FAR SHORE:
A sanctuary free of peril

The Traveller

The Solution: The person thinks, "Why don't I gather grass, sticks, branches, and leaves and make a raft? Riding on the raft... I can safely reach the far shore."



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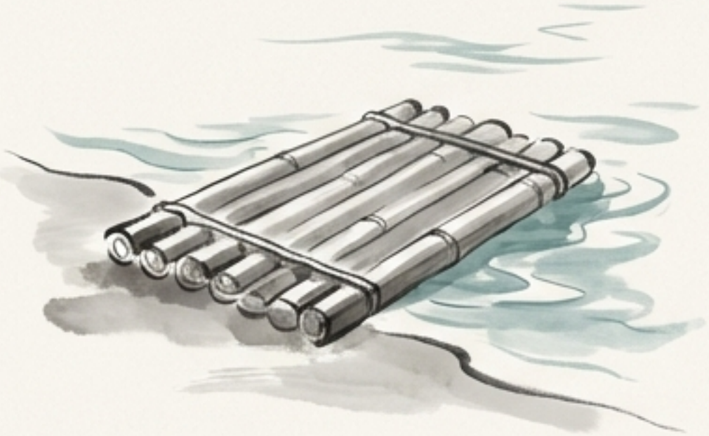
The Folly of Carrying What Saved You

The Traveller's Mistake: After crossing, the person thinks, "This raft has been very helpful to me... Why don't I hoist it on my head or pick it up on my shoulder and go wherever I want?"

Would that person be doing what should be done with that raft?

"The Profound Lesson:

In the same way, I have taught a simile of the teaching as a raft: for crossing over, not for holding on. By understanding the simile of the raft, you will even give up the teachings, let alone what is not the teachings."



The Correct Action: "Beach it on dry land or set it adrift on the water and go wherever I want."

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The Near Shore: The Six Grounds for Views

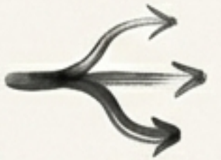
The ‘perilous near shore’ is built upon fundamental attachments to a sense of self. The Buddha identifies six grounds where this view takes root.

1. **Form** (the body) —

2. **Feeling** (pleasant, unpleasant, neutral)

3. **Perception** (recognizing and naming)

4. **Choices** (volitional formations)



5. **Whatever is seen, heard, thought, known…** (consciousness and its objects)

6. **The view:** “The cosmos and the self are one and the same… After death I will be that, permanent, everlasting, eternal…”

The Unlearned Person’s Refrain: An unlearned person regards each of these as: ‘This is mine, I am this, this is my self.’

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The Anxiety of Annihilation

When a person who holds the view “The cosmos and the self are one” hears the teaching to uproot all attachments, a deep fear can arise.

> “They think, “Whoa, I’m going to be annihilated and destroyed! I won’t even exist any more!” They sorrow, wail, lament, and fall into confusion.”

The Cause: This anxiety is rooted in the mistaken belief in a permanent, everlasting self that is now being threatened.

The Absence of Anxiety: The one who does not hold this view does not have this fear. They don’t identify with the view, so its removal is a relief, not a destruction.

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A Search for a Self That Does Not Suffer

The Buddha's Rational Inquiry

"It would make sense to grasp at a theory of self that didn't give rise to sorrow, lamentation, pain, sadness, and distress. But do you see any such theory of self?"
→ "No, sir."

1. "Were a self to exist, would there be the thought, 'Belonging to my self'?" → (Yes, sir.)

2. "Were what belongs to a self to exist, would there be the thought, 'My self'?" → (Yes, sir.)

3. "But since a self and what belongs to a self are not found as a genuine fact, is not the following a totally foolish teaching: 'The cosmos and the self are one…'?'

How could it not, sir? It's a totally foolish teaching.

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Seeing Experience As It Is: Impermanent, Suffering, Not-Self

The practice involves examining the components of our experience (the five aggregates) with right understanding.

The Five Aggregates

The Three-Part Analysis

1. Is it permanent or impermanent?
   → "Impermanent, sir."

2. If it's impermanent, is it suffering or happiness?
   → "Suffering, sir."

3. If it's impermanent, suffering, and perishable, is it fit to be regarded thus: 'This is mine, I am this, this is my self'?
   → "No, sir."

Seeing this, a learned noble disciple grows disillusioned...
Being disillusioned, desire fades away.
When desire fades away they're **freed**.

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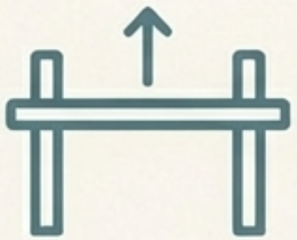
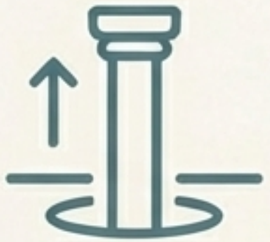
The Far Shore: Banner Lowered, Burden Dropped

The mendicant who is freed is described with a series of powerful epithets.



Lifted the cross-bar:
Has given up ignorance.

Filled in the moat:
Has given up transmigrating through births.



Pulled up the pillar:
Has given up craving.

Unimpeded:
Has given up the five lower fetters.

A noble one with banner lowered and burden dropped, detached, detached:
Has given up the conceit ‘I am’.

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What I Describe Is Suffering and Its Cessation

The Buddha notes that some accuse him of being an "exterminator" who advocates for the "annihilation... of an existing being." He calls this a false claim.

"In the past, as today, what I describe is suffering and the cessation of suffering."

As a result, if others praise or abuse such a person, they are not elated or resentful.

They simply recognize it as phenomena relating to what has already been understood and let go of.

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The Teaching Well-Explained

"Suppose a person was to carry off the grass, sticks, branches, and leaves in this Jeta's Grove... Would you think, 'This person is carrying us off...'?'
("No, sir... Because to us that's neither self nor belonging to self.")

In the same way, mendicants, give up what isn't yours. Give it up... And what isn't yours? Form... feeling... perception... choices... consciousness isn't yours: give it up.

The teaching well-explained thus by me is clarified, revealed, illuminated, and stripped of patchwork. It leads stream-enterers, once-returners, and the perfected to their respective goals, and even those with a degree of faith and love for me are all bound for heaven.

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